

Creating a Compliant Parent Communication Strategy in **Multiple** Languages

A proactive way to support parent engagement and ensure timely communication in increasingly diverse districts





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Introduction

As school districts across America grow in population, they also become more diverse. The result is that a one-size-fits-all format no longer works when it comes to parent communications and engagement. Left unattended, it is easy for processes to get out of control, which leads to redundancy, accessibility constraints, and gaps in quality.

School to home communication processes are essential in supporting parent engagement and federal compliance. How can you be sure that everyone responsible for communicating to parents has access to the legal, translation, and editing resources they need to be truly confident that parents are receiving an accurate message about their child's welfare, services and opportunities?

This digital eBook helps school district leaders create a parent communication strategy that addresses the needs of a diverse population and supports parent engagement. This resource provides administrators with information and best practices for setting up a comprehensive communication resource and enabling staff to quickly and easily access the tools they need to engage effectively with parents. When parent communication processes are clearly defined and supported, parents are better able to engage in their child's education while teachers and staff are freed from the labor required to create and maintain the right resources, giving them more instructional time with students.

Why do you need a parent communication strategy in your school district?

As an educator, your first and biggest priority is successful student outcomes. While student success hinges on many factors, a solid parent communication strategy that gives parents the opportunity to be aware of, and participate in, their student's education is a foundational element in student success. Communicating with parents in a language they understand is also a civil right, and is therefore legally required. Parent engagement helps build an essential bridge between school and home, and every student and family deserves parent notifications that they can read and understand.

Parent communication strategies are crucial for several reasons, including:

COMMUNICATING IMPORTANT INFORMATION:

School communications are not only useful, but essential when it comes to relaying information from faculty, administration, and even state officials to students, parents, and families. This information may be federally mandated or unique to a particular district, but having a communication plan and supporting tools are critical to meeting communication needs and compliance requirements.

FURTHERING PARENT INVOLVEMENT:

Thorough and clear parent communications can help families and parents/legal guardians become more engaged in their student's success. When a parent can read a notification, newsletter, or other document, they are more likely to stay involved in their student's education.

FOSTERING AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT:

A district's communication strategy needs to address parents and families in languages they can understand. Not only is this a great way to encourage inclusion and strengthen relationships, but it's a civil rights requirement.



The spectrum of district effort

When it comes to building a district-wide parent communication strategy, there isn't a one-size-fits-all solution. What's more, many districts find themselves approaching their solutions from different places. For instance, your district may have already begun building a comprehensive, compliant district communications plan with all the legally mandated parent notifications translated into all the necessary languages. If so, you're a step ahead of the rest.

However, it's not uncommon for a school district not to have a plan in place, or to have started but never finished. School and district staff are extremely busy, and compliant parent notification plans don't always reach the top of the priority list. Sometimes, it's just lower on a long list of more pressing deadlines, but in any case, the worst possible scenario is when districts are forced to rapidly prioritize a parent communication strategy due to a noncompliance finding. In that scenario, corrective action is issued, and finding a reactive solution quickly becomes a primary concern.

Most districts fall into one of these three categories:

NO MULTI-LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY IN PLACE: Sometimes, school or district leaders don't see a need to incorporate a parent notifications strategy, or don't know it was a legal requirement.

MANAGING A COMMUNICATION STRATEGY INTERNALLY: Districts may have initiated a parent communication strategy that they manage internally, with one or more components such as internal writers, in-house or hired translators, and their own library of files.

PURCHASING A PARENT NOTICE SERVICE: Other districts opt to outsource their parent communication, opting to work with a communication partner to create a standard level of quality across the district.

No matter where they are starting from and how they choose to proceed, school districts must have certain pieces in place when creating a multi-language parent communication strategy. These components range from:



Types of parent communications

There are a variety of parent notifications and some are higher in priority than others. All are important to maintaining a comprehensive and inclusive communication strategy.

FEDERALLY MANDATED COMMUNICATIONS:

There are certain parent notifications that are required throughout a district, such as Section 504 parent notices, documents for English language learners, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorizations of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) transitioning to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The “Determination of Student Eligibility for Program Placement” letter is one such document required under Titles I and III. Its eight different points are required by law, and often requires trained legal assistance to properly draft.

EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS: In addition to federally mandated parent communications, such as those detailing programs for EL students, any

significant communications must be translated quickly for all non-English speaking parents. These often have a short turnaround, such as a violent incident at school, a campus lockdown, a medical outbreak, etc. In these cases, it’s even more important to have a reliable, experienced translator on-board who can translate these notifications quickly and accurately.

ADDITIONAL COMMUNICATIONS: Finally, many schools have additional needs independent to their own districts, such as field trip forms, handbooks, calendars, information about free or reduced lunch services, and nurse’s office forms.

Managing all aspects of parent communications can be difficult when districts do it on their own. Yet, however a district chooses to approach it, it is responsible for its own compliance. In order to follow the law and foster an inclusive, communication-driven learning environment, you must have a parent notification system in place covering all necessary languages, types of learners, and legislative guidelines.



IT’S THE LAW

In order to remain compliant, states and districts must adhere to federal regulations, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In this case, that means providing parent notifications to all students’ families regardless of race, color, national origin, or language.

In the case of *Lau v. Nichols*, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the Department of Education memorandum of May 25, 1970, which directed school districts to take steps to help Limited-English proficient (LEP) students overcome language barriers and to ensure that they can participate meaningfully in the district’s educational programs.

The U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education have put forth a fact sheet stating that “schools must communicate information to limited English proficient parents in a language they can understand about any program, service, or activity that is called to the attention of parents who are proficient in English,” including language assistance programs, report cards, and student discipline policies and procedures.

ESSA requires that communications with parents be “to the extent practicable, in a language that parents can understand” (Title I, Sec. 1111(h)(1)(B)(ii)).

How districts manage communications internally

Managing parent communications in-house may be the most common approach. In this case, school districts must figure out a way to get their communications written, reviewed, translated, and disseminated on their own — or manage the hiring of individual parties to handle each aspect.

Still, it often depends on size of the district and the resources they have available to dedicate. Here are three common scenarios:

SMALL DISTRICTS may hire a bilingual individual certified to translate, especially if there is just one major language of focus. This person can also act as an interpreter in meetings or over the phone. Small districts (those with 5-10 schools) may rely on a Spanish teacher to translate parent notifications. However, foreign language faculty must be trained or certified for this type of role. Many foreign language teachers who teach at beginner levels are not qualified to translate or interpret, even for their own school district. What's more, this type of additional work can be a burden on the faculty, especially in small districts that don't have the resources to hire additional staff.

MIDSIZE DISTRICTS may hire one person who focuses on single language translations (such as Spanish only), and then hire contractors to do the translations for the less common languages as needed. However, anyone hired as a translator must be properly trained or certified.

LARGER DISTRICTS may have multiple languages spoken by students and families, and also a larger budget to hire multiple translators to handle the parent notifications. Larger districts may have an actual translation department with anywhere from 3 to 15 people working on translation and interpretation. In these scenarios, there are simply more resources to handle the need.



ALL TRANSLATORS MUST BE TRAINED OR CERTIFIED

The Department of Justice (DOJ) and Office for Civil Rights (OCR) issued a guidance statement on January 7, 2015, stating that “Some examples of when the Departments have found compliance issues regarding communication with LEP parents include when school districts: (1) rely on students, siblings, friends, or untrained school staff to translate or interpret for parents.” In other words, using untrained resources can put districts at serious risk for compliance violations in civil rights and federal law.



How districts outsource their parent communications

While many districts initially want to handle all the requirements themselves in-house, the other option is to outsource the work — or partner with an outside organization — to create an effective and compliant parent communications strategy. There are a few ways to do this:

FIND AN EXPERIENCED WRITER AND

LEGAL REVIEW FIRM: Getting the notifications written is the first step. Be sure you have the proper information and resources to write each notice, then — when necessary — have them legally reviewed before distribution.

HIRE TRAINED TRANSLATORS OR

INTERPRETERS: In order to meet compliance standards, all parent communications must be translated into the parents' spoken language. Smaller districts may not have the financial resources to hire someone full-time, and need to seek out a local company or contract a trained professional.

Medium to large districts will outsource the work, then hire an agency for quick turnaround needs, or use call-in services to do this over the phone.

CREATE AND UPDATE LIBRARIES OF DOCUMENTS:

Once a school has a system in place with documents used on a repeating basis (annually or within the school year), they will create their own document libraries as a homemade system of getting translations done and making sure staff knows where to access them.

WORK WITH A STRATEGIC PARENT NOTICES PARTNER:

Working with an organization who specializes in creating parent notices removes the burden of finding and vetting all these components, and instead offers a one-stop shop for everything from federally required parent notices to district-specific announcements. This approach can substantially reduce the time and resources needed to write, review, translate, store, update and distribute documents over time.

The costs of in-house communications

There is a financial burden of creating parent notice communications in-house, especially since there are several components to a successful, compliant communications plan, including:

- Writing the content in accordance with federal laws and guidance
- Having the content legally reviewed
- Translating the content for English Learners (EL) and their families
- Distributing the content throughout the district or state
- Managing ongoing updates and maintenance

BREAKDOWN OF COSTS FOR HANDLING PARENT NOTICES IN-HOUSE

Obtaining the human capital in-house to perform these aspects of communication can become unexpectedly expensive. In fact, let's break it down by the numbers. Below, we discuss sample costs based on realistic communications requirements and consultation costs in a hypothetical school district scenario.

NUMBER OF DOCUMENTS REQUIRED

In a typical school district, the amount of required documents and forms may look like this:



212 general education letters and forms (some being civil rights requirements)



100 ESSA-based compliance forms and letters (40 required for English Learner compliance)

The total number of documents required is around **312** — and that doesn't include individual district communications that fall outside the realm of legally mandated documents.



COST OF DOCUMENT CREATION

3 hours x 312 documents = 936 hrs

936 hours x \$50/hour¹ = \$46,800



COST OF LEGAL REVIEW

100 documents x 1.5hrs/doc = 150 hrs

150 hours x \$400/hr = 60,000



COST OF TRANSLATION

312 docs x \$200/language x 3-6 languages² =

\$187,200 - \$374,400

² 3-6 languages is a typical range for a small to medium-sized school district.

SUMMARY OF COSTS:

DOCUMENT CREATION = \$46,800

¹Represents a blend of costs associated with dedicated time from internal employees and associated third-parties.

LEGAL REVIEW = \$60,000

TRANSLATION = \$374,400

TOTAL INITIAL COST = \$481,200

This sample cost break down demonstrates how the true total cost of handling ESSA communications and general parent notices in-house can result in an unjustifiable amount for most school districts. From the cost of internal staff or experienced consultants to write the content, to the cost of legal review, to hiring a trained translator, the financial burden continues to build as the content and process is maintained annually. Finally, the prospect of developing a distribution system and training all parties on where to find it and how to access it — in addition to the task of annually updating with regulatory guidance or legislation changes — can be daunting, to say the least.

TOTAL ONGOING COSTS³ = \$30,000 - \$100,000

³Approximation of costs associated with monitoring federal guidance, updating notices, conducting legal reviews, translating, hosting, maintaining, and distributing throughout the district.



Choose to be proactive

As the country's population continues to move more toward a more diverse patchwork of cultures and languages, these obligations to our Limited English Proficiency families will become more important — and will require more resources from districts. An up-to-date and compliant parent communications strategy can be difficult and, in addition, educators and administrators are often so overworked and overwhelmed that opportunities for improvement and bringing systems up to date easily slip through the cracks.

However, the risk of inaccurately writing or inadvertently missing an important notification can impact a student's access to highly needed resources. While federal and state monitoring agencies may issue corrective actions for districts found to be out of compliance, the OCR and DOJ are even more stringent. Instead of waiting until something like this happens, districts can rely on service partners to oversee all the important components of forging these plans from creation to storage to distribution.



Looking to the future

The 2016-2017 school year is a transition year for states and school districts, as it signals NCLB coming to a close and ESSA beginning to take effect.

Of course, laws can shift after going into effect. The NCLB reauthorization was written with a shelf life of 7 years, but it was 14 years until the reauthorization to ESSA. Now that ESSA is coming into being, it

may only be 5 years before Congress rewrites it again. All in all, it can be difficult to stay informed of all the changes and developments that happen on a federal level, which can influence how states and school districts need to act. What's more, changes in leadership can affect how districts approach and maintain compliance over time.

Organizations like TransACT can help administrators and educators be prepared with what to expect, stay consistent with their actions, and access everything they need to stay compliant — no matter how the legal requirements change.

How a parent notices partner can help lessen the burden

When it comes to choosing between managing your communications strategy internally versus partnering with an outside company, districts should consider the cost and complexity of maintaining compliance alone. After all, staying compliant is not only the law, but also helps ensure that all students and parents are offered equitable opportunity in their education.

In addition, a comprehensive solution lowers risk and costs including writing, reviewing, translating, and distributing necessary documents. Such a solution also frees up staff member's time and reallocates resources towards student achievement.

TransACT is a leading organization in delivering communication strategy management to states and school districts nationwide. Education leaders always have the students' and families' best interests at heart, and organizations like TransACT can help them realize their legal requirements while also taking care of each task for them.

A solution provider like TransACT covers:

- Parent notice creation and updating
- Legal review of federally mandated communications where necessary
- Access to all notices in priority languages
- Access to translators for all necessary languages
- Easy-to-access online document library for state and district-wide access



TransACT addresses urgent parent notice requirements under NCLB now, and the transition to ESSA as well as EL requirements and district-wide document management.

TransACT helps districts easily meet time-consuming, competing priorities so that they can focus on the classroom. With deep savings over the cost of performing high-quality communications on their own, districts can stay updated on all past and recently released legislation, regulations, and guidance, and ensure that all communications abide by state and federal laws. This approach supports authentic parent engagement, which is necessary for student success. On the school's end, teachers and staff need only to access the library of documents to find everything they need, in priority languages, at any time. In this way, they remain proactive, compliant, communicative, and inclusive.

Lastly, TransACT offers a proactive solution. While TransACT is often a go-to after a compliance finding, existing TransACT customers find reward and peace of mind knowing they have a proactive solution in place.

Ready to learn more? [Contact TransACT](#) to learn how you can streamline your district's documents, reduce costs, maintain compliance, and improve parent engagement.